

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” by Raymond F. Collins, published in *Emmanuel* 117 (2011) 360-378

August 8 is the feast of St. Dominic, the founder of the Order of Preachers, popularly known as the Dominicans. The semi-contemplative order that he founded was devoted to study and preaching. Through preaching, he sought to reconcile the Albigensians to the church. According to the acts prepared for his canonization, Dominic “always carried with him the gospel according to Matthew and the epistles of Paul, and so well did he study them that he almost knew them from memory.”

In the thirteenth century readings from the Gospel according to Matthew were most frequently read during the celebration of the eucharist. A similar situation existed in the church for the entire millennium preceding Dominic’s ministry. Matthew’s was the gospel that was read and preached to the people of God. In that situation, it was no wonder that Dominic, the preacher, virtually memorized the gospel that is the first book in the canonical New Testament.

The liturgical preference for the Gospel of Matthew remained in the Western church until the reform of liturgy after Vatican Council II. Now, in Cycle A, we have the opportunity to unfold the riches of that gospel to our congregations, just as Dominic did almost eight hundred years ago.

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 3, 2011

LITURGY

Zechariah 9:9-10 describes the king entering a restored Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. Were he to enter the city on a horse, he would have been seen as a warrior-king rather than as a king of peace.

Romans 8:9, 11-13 speaks of the consequences of the Spirit abiding within us. The promise of future resurrection is not the least of these consequences.

Matthew 11:25-30 reprises the theme of Jesus’ meekness from Zechariah (see Matt 21:5). The reading comes from the middle of a section of Matthew’s gospel (Matthew 11-13) that describes the rejection of Jesus.

The first part of the passage (vv. 25-26; cf. Luke 10:21-22) is a prayer of thanksgiving similar to the thanksgivings found in other Jewish prayers, especially in Qumran’s “Thanksgiving Scroll” which give praise to God for what he has done for the one who offers the prayer (1QH 7:26-27; 10:14; 11:3-4; 11:15; see also Sir 51:1-2a; 1Q35, frag. 1). The three-fold structure is classic: 1) a statement in the first person singular; 2) a formula of direct address to God; 3) a recitation of the reason(s) for praise and thanksgiving.

The formula of address to God is striking in that Jesus adds to the designation of God as Father—his “Abba” prayer—a more typical Jewish designation of God as Lord of heaven and earth. The reason for Jesus’ thanksgiving is that his revelation has been addressed to “little ones” (*nepioi*, “infants”) rather than the wise and the learned. The wise and the learned may have been the scribes of Jesus’ generation or heroes, the righteous, or community leaders to whom revelations are most often given.

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The second part of the passage (v. 27) is a statement about revelation that is distinctly Christian. The verse speaks of the mutual knowledge that exists between the Father and the Son.

The intimacy between Jesus and the Father mentioned in this verse is so similar to things said about the relationship between Jesus and the Father in the Fourth Gospel that this verse is sometimes called Matthew’s “Johannine logion.” Jewish wisdom tradition apparently lies behind the verse, just as the wisdom tradition lies behind the formulation of many of the traditions preserved in the Fourth Gospel.

The third part of the passage (vv. 28-30) contains a pair of invitations, each of which is accompanied by a promise of rest. Most commentators believe that the first invitation is addressed to those who do not yet belong to the group of Jesus’ disciples but some scholars hold that the words were addressed to Christian missionaries. They find support for this view in the fact that “labor” was virtually a technical term used in the early church to describe the work of evangelization. Jesus promises rest, a cipher for salvation, to those who come to him. The salvation of which Jesus speaks is not to be equated with the heavenly rest that occurs only after death.

The second invitation speaks about a yoke, the kind of wooden shoulder harness that porters used when carrying heavy loads. Jewish tradition uses the image of taking a yoke upon oneself in reference to wisdom (Sir 51:26), the Torah (*Mishnah*, “The Fathers” [’Avot] 3.5), or the commandments (*Mishnah*, “Blessings” [*Bekhorot*] 2.2). Matthew relates the yoke directly to Jesus. The wording of the promise of rest attached to the second invitation echoes that of Jer 6:16.

BROKEN FOR US

The Fourth of July weekend should be a time to reflect on the ideas that inspired the American Revolution rather than being merely a time for a beginning-of-the-summer cookout. Today’s gospel reading also provides an occasion to reflect on some of the basics of our faith. It reminds us of how privileged we are to have received the revelation of Jesus. Like little children, we really have no claim upon that revelation. It also reminds us of the unique relationship between Jesus and the Father that not only grounds our salvation but is also the basis of the revelation that we have received. Finally, though it is sometimes difficult to maintain the Christian life in the midst of all our obligations and responsibilities, Jesus’ promise of rest reminds us that it is worth our while to do so.

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 10, 2011

LITURGY

Isaiah 55:10-11, using the image of life-giving rain and snow coming down from heaven, is an oracle that speaks of the effectiveness of God’s word.

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Romans 8:18-23 proclaims the solidarity of humans with all creation both in the present time of travail and in the freedom that belongs to the future.

Matthew 13:1-23 contains the parable of the farmer who went out to sow his seed, the first of the seven parables in Matthew’s chapter of parables (Matthew 13). The reading includes the parable (vv. 3-9), a general commentary on the parables (vv. 10-17), and an allegorical explanation of the parable (vv. 18-23). The evangelist has taken the material from his Markan source (Mark 4:1-20; cf. Luke 8:4-15).

In setting the scene (vv. 1-20, Matthew accentuates the role of Jesus as teacher by twice saying that he sat down. Sitting was the posture of rabbis while they were teaching; their disciples would gather round to listen and learn. As is the case with most parables, the parable has one main point. The point of this parable is that seed which has been sown produces a great harvest in varying quantities, one hundred, sixty, and thirty times what was sown. In the balanced structure of the parable, the three results correspond to the three images of lost seed in the first part of the parable. Matthew provides additional emphasis by adding a gnomic sentence, “Whoever has ears ought to hear” (Matt 11:15) to Jesus story.

The general commentary on the parables (vv. 10-17) is attached to the parable of the sower in all three Synoptic Gospels. In Matthew, the commentary applies to all seven of the parables in chapter thirteen. It begins with a query by the disciples whom Jesus describes as recipients of a divine gift. Knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of God has been given to the disciples. “Mysteries” is to be taken in its apocalyptic sense (see Daniel 2) as a somewhat enigmatic revelation; the language of revelation is almost necessarily figurative.

Those who are not the beneficiaries of God’s gift will lose even what little understanding of God’s reign they presently have. That calls for an explanatory comment, which the evangelist gives in the form of a fulfillment citation. Isaiah 6:9-10 teaches that the rejection of God’s teaching is in accordance with his will.

A beatitude (v. 16), found only in Matthew, confirms the happiness of the “insiders,” Jesus’ disciples. The references to ears and hearing correspond to the exhortation that Matthew appended to the parable (v. 15). The disciples of Jesus are indeed fortunate; they have been given a revelation that not even the great prophets and the righteous of Israel were privileged to receive.

Virtually all scholars agree that the allegorical explanation of the parable (vv. 18-25) did not come from Jesus himself. It originated within the early church for apologetic reasons. Why wasn’t the message of the gospel received by everyone despite the zealous efforts of the first missionaries? The devil, the desire for riches, and worldly anxiety are some of the most formidable obstacles to the reception of the gospel. The explanation identifies the parable as the “parable of the sower,” thus betraying its apologetic focus on the evangelist. The parable itself really focuses on the seed rather than the sower.

BROKEN FOR US

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Many a homilist is tempted to preach about the early church’s interpretation of the parable rather than about the parable itself. That the shorter reading of today’s gospel text omits both the general commentary on the parables and the allegorical explanation of the parable indicates that the homily really should focus on the parable itself. The point of the parable is that the kingdom of God will come about despite the obstacles that appear to stand in its way. The numerical quantities mentioned in the parable suggest the magnitude of God’s reign.

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 17, 2011

LITURGY

Wisdom 12:13, 16-19 speaks about divine Providence.

Romans 8:26-27 talks about the Spirit’s prayer for those who, despite their weakness, are God’s holy people.

Matthew 13:24-43 follows immediately after last week’s gospel reading. Today’s lection includes the parable of the weeds (vv. 24-30), two short parables that are introduced in the same way as the parable of the weeds (vv. 31-33), a short general commentary on parables (vv. 34-35), and an allegorical explanation of the parable of the weeds (vv. 36-43).

The parable of the weeds is found only in Matthew’s gospel. Scholars say that is part of Matthew’s proper material, his *Sondergut*. Unlike the immediately preceding remarks in the Matthean narrative (Matt 13:10-23, last week’s gospel), the parable of the weeds is addressed to the crowds, curious bystanders who came out to listen to Jesus. The short narrative describes two sowings, one by the owner of the field who sows good seed; the other by a scoundrel who sowed weeds (*zizania*, a weed that looks like wheat) in the fields. Each sowing produced the expected results, wheat and weeds.

The master is expected to decide what is to happen as weeds begin to appear in the field. The decision: the weeds and the wheat must be allowed to reach maturity. Then the weeds can be pulled and burned while the wheat can be harvested and collected in the owner’s barn.

The point of the story is that the audience identify with one or the other sowing. The story shatters the status quo. Those who listen to Jesus have a decision to make. Nonetheless, the decision will not be fully ratified until both sowings have come to fruition.

The two short parables (vv. 31-33) should be taken together. The pair are parables of contrast. A relatively small beginning results in a large result. The size of the mustard seed was legendary; a fully grown plant could reach 10-12 feet in height. A small amount of yeast could cause a relatively large amount of flour to rise. When leavened, a batch of flour of three measures was enough to feed 90-100 people. Matthew, a Jewish-Christian author, tends to feature males in his parables. In this pair of parables, however, a man and a woman are the leading characters. Hearers and readers of these parables should realize that the point of both of

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them is that Jesus’ ministry is one of small beginnings, a contrast with the eschatological outcome of his ministry.

Unlike the situation in last week’s reading, where the commentary was directed to Jesus’ disciples (Matt 12:10-11), the commentary on the parables in this week’s reading is addressed to the crowds. Once again, Jesus uses a citation of scripture—which the evangelist does not formally present as a fulfillment citation—to make his point. The quotation affirms that the obscurity of Jesus words is in conformity with the will of God. The evangelist attributes the Scripture, Ps 78:2, to “the prophet.” Apparently he had a rather broad understanding of “prophet,” as someone who speaks in the name of God, rather than restricting the epithet to the great eighth century prophets, Elijah and Elisha, or the writing prophets, whose names serve as the patronyms for sixteen Old Testament books.

There is a change of scene so that as was the case with the explanation of the “parable of the sower.” Parables are addressed to the crowds; their explanation is reserved to Jesus’ disciples. As was the case in last week’s reading from Matthew, the explanation of the parable the explanation was the creation of the early church and is now reported by Matthew. Each of seven terms in the parable is given an explanation. Thus the parable becomes an allegory. Rather than calling the audience to make a choice, to be for or against Jesus, the story becomes a symbolic representation of the history of salvation.

BROKEN FOR US

Decisions! Decisions! Decisions! Many of us have difficulty making decisions. Still others have difficulty living with the decisions that they have made.

Nonetheless, the parable of the weeds in the field is one that calls those who hear it to make a decision. Do we stand with the one who sows good seed and all that that represents; or do we stand with the scoundrel who has some other intention and is quite content to have bad mixed with good. No compromise is possible! So pick one or the other.

The two short parables are of a different sort. They tell us not to be frustrated by small things. The signs of the coming of the kingdom of God may seem insignificant but what they harbingers is something huge, almost beyond human capability to imagine. Such is the kingdom of God, of which we perceive only small signs in the present moment of history.

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 24, 2011

LITURGY

1 Kings 3:5, 7-12 describes God’s being pleased when Solomon asked for the gift of Wisdom.

Romans 8:28-30 portrays believers as conformed to the image of the Son of God.

Matthew 13:44-52 contains three short parables, the last of the seven parables in Matthew’s chapter on parables. All three of the parables are found only in Matthew.

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The first two parables (vv. 44-46) are addressed to the crowds rather than to the disciples. They short stories are really a double parable. In the first story a man accidentally finds a treasure in a field. Sources like Josephus (*Jewish Wars* 7.114-15) and Horace (*Satires* 2.6.10-13) remind us that such occurrences were not uncommon in antiquity. The second story tells of a merchant who finds a particularly valuable pearl in a batch of pearls. Parables that speak about pearls were common in Jewish literature, for example, in the “Sabbath” tractate of the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Shabbat* 119a).

These stories remind me of similar “findings” today. The first story reminds me of a person who regularly purchases a lottery ticket and one day “happens” to win the Megabucks. The second story reminds me of a friend who “happened” to find a rather expensive bottle of wine among odd bottles of wine on sale at the local wine store. My friend returned to the store to ask whether the merchant had any more bottles of that fine wine that he was willing to sell for that price.

Matthew’s two stories have a double focus. They focus, respectively, on the value of the trove and on the extraordinary effort to secure it made by the one who finds the object. He sells everything in order to have it as his own. The introduction to the pair of parables suggests that the kingdom of heaven is the valuable reality.

The third parable (vv. 47-48) is accompanied by an explanation, as had been the case of the parable of the sower and the parable of the weeds, but now the explanation immediately follows the parable. The net featured in the parable is a dragnet. One end is held on the shore, the other is taken out by boat which then returns to land. When the net is hauled in, the good fish are saved while the fish of poorer quality are tossed back into the water.

The allegorical explanation of the parable (vv. 49-50), similar to that of the parable of the weeds, interprets the process of sorting as referring to the last judgment. Then the righteous will be separated from those who are evil. The imagery that describes the punishment of evil-doers previously occurred in Matt 13:42. The image of the “fiery furnace” is borrowed from Dan 3:6, 11, 15, 20. “Gnashing of teeth” is a Matthean expression. The phrase is used in apocalyptic contexts (Matt 8:12; 13:50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30).

The final pair of verses (vv. 51-52) concludes Jesus’ discourse in parables. Jesus asks the disciples, his “students,” if they have understood the lesson. They answer “yes” but subsequent events will prove that they didn’t really understand as much as they claimed to understand.

Verse 52 is a general observation on Christian scribes, among whom the evangelist himself is to be counted. Like a householder who sometimes takes old things out of the storeroom and at other times takes old things out, the Christian scribe uses both the old and the new. The Christian scribe will make use of both the Jewish scriptures and the new teaching of Jesus.

BROKEN FOR US

It will be difficult for a homilist to preach on the entirety of today’s gospel reading. Rather than attempting to do so, he or she might do one of three things. One would be to focus

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on the first pair of parables and speak about the value of the kingdom of heaven and the effort that believers should make in order to enter the kingdom. Another homily might focus on those who are “in the net,” in the community of believers. The community consists of people who are good and others who are not. Together they coexist for a while but comes the Day of the Lord and judgment will occur (cf. Matt 25:31-46). A third subject could well be that of the Christian scholar, the scribe, who must make use of the Scriptures but must also be attentive to what is new, contemporary developments in theology and church teaching.

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 31, 2011

LITURGY

Isaiah 55:1-3 is a magnificent description of God lavishing his gifts on the needy in the restored Israel.

Romans 8:35, 37-39 lists sixteen realities that cannot separate us from the love of Christ and the love of the Father for us. Lest anyone fail to grasp his message, the apostle adds “nor any other creature.”

Matthew 14:13-21 is the first of two stories in Matthew’s gospel that describe Jesus feeding a crowd. The other is found in Matt 15:32-39.

The story of the feeding of the multitude is the only miracle story found in all four canonical gospels. Like Matthew, his Markan source has two such stories (Mark 6:32-44; 8:1-10) but the gospels according to Luke and John have only one story (Luke 9:10-17; John 6:13). Undoubtedly versions of the story appear so often in the gospels because it was a good story to be told while the first Christians were celebrating the eucharist, remembering that Jesus had given them the bread of life to eat.

The story is generally called “The Multiplication of Loaves.” In fact none of the stories say that Jesus multiplied loaves. The emphasis is on Jesus’ feeding the crowds. Hence, the story is more appropriately called “The Feeding of the Multitude.”

The six versions of the story differ slightly from one another. These differences point to aspects of the eucharist to which the respective evangelists wanted to draw attention. Often they represent the interests of the communities in which the stories were told before they were written down by the evangelists.

The story in Matthew 14 is very much a Jewish-Christian story. The numbers, particularly the “five” loaves and the crowd of “five thousand” men, reflect the importance of that number in Jewish tradition. The twelve baskets recall that there were twelve tribes of Israel and that the apostles, the pillars of the renewed Israel, were also twelve in number. Moreover, the fact that women and children were not counted reflects a Jewish environment. In those days, ten men—that is, ten men not counting women and children—were required as the quorum for a synagogue service. (The version of the feeding of the multitude found in Matt 15:32-39 has a flavor that is much more Gentile Christian, witness the different numbers.)

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The setting of the story is typical. John the Baptist has died. Jesus wants to get away by himself, presumably to pray. The crowds follow him. Jesus is moved with compassion and cures the sick.

The story is told according to the three-part structure, typical of a miracle story. The first part describes the difficulty of the situation. In this case, the hour was late. The crowds were huge (but the size of the crowd is not mentioned until the end of the story). There was no food readily available in that deserted place.

The second part of a miracle story is generally presented in the form of an authoritative command and/or ritualistic gesture. In this case, the taking bread—blessing (*klasas*)—breaking—giving sequence recalls what happened at the Last Supper (Matt 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19) and was commemorated in early Christian celebrations of the eucharist (1 Cor 11:23-24; cf. Luke 24:30). The evangelist draws particular attention to the fact that the disciples of Jesus distributed the loaves to the crowds (cf. v. 16).

The third part of a miracle story emphasizes the reality of the miracle. In this case, the crowds had enough to eat. That there were twelve baskets of food left over and that the crowd was one of five thousand men—not counting the women and children—provide additional emphasis to the story. Told from the perspective of the church, the fragments (*klasmaton*) recall that the early church in Jerusalem identified the eucharist as “the breaking (*klasei*) of bread” (Acts 2:42).

BROKEN FOR US

Obviously today’s homily should focus on the eucharist, the legacy of Christ to his church. He gave the bread to his disciples so that they could distribute it to the crowds. Through his disciples, Jesus fed the multitude as he continues to do in the celebration of the eucharist.

The homily might provide the homilist with an occasion to mention the importance of the breaking of the bread (the *fractio panis*) in the celebration of the eucharist. This important